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ABSTRACT

More than 500 television news directors were surveyed in a study of the effects of three factors--multiple ownership of stations, newspaper crossownership, and cable television use--on the quality of local news programing. For purposes of the study, "quality" was defined in terms of expenditures for news programing (greater expenditures generally are used for a larger or more experienced news staff, more or better news gathering equipment, or a greater amount of time devoted to broadcasting news). Data were obtained from a mail questionnaire sent to the news directors of all commercial, network-affiliated television stations in the continental United States. An analysis of the data revealed that neither of the two ownership types had an adverse effect on the quality of local television news. Increased cable use, however, was associated with a slight decrease in news quality. (Appendixes contain copies of the questionnaire and secondary analyses of the data.) (FL)

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OWNERSHIP, CATV, AND THE QUALITY OF LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

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C S 204 585

Ownership, CATV, and the Quality
of Local Television News

There is probably no definition of broadcast news "quality" that we can all agree on. Yet, that concept of "quality" is one that is vital to our work. In broadcast news courses we attempt to instill in our students the ability to produce "quality" copy. Those of us interested in policy research often study structural elements that may lead to a higher "quality" news product--whatever that may mean. This study is no different. After a definition of television news quality is presented, this study will analyze how some television station and market characteristics relate to this quality standard.

Three of these structural elements will be of particular importance here: television station multiple ownership, crossownership with a daily newspaper in the same market, and the level of cable television penetration in the television market. Each of these factors has been of great concern to the Federal Communications Commission in its recent policymaking activities. In March of this year the Commission underwent a notice of inquiry into its present multiple ownership rules.[1] The Supreme Court recently made a ruling on the FCC's crossownership rules that still leaves the reasonableness of allowing crossownerships open to question.[2] Finally, the FCC just completed an inquiry into the economic impact of cable television on television broadcasting, having particular interest in investigating whether increased cable use leads to a lessening in the quality of over-the-air programming.[3]

Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between these three policy matters and the ability of a television station

to serve the public interest, as measured by the quality of their local news programming.

Definition of Quality

Many studies have looked at how multiple ownership and crossownership affect the public interest performance of television stations. The studies emphasize the effect of ownership on advertising rates, station prices, and the quantities of various types of programming broadcast.[4] The general verdict has been that ownership type does not appear to adversely affect these public interest standards.

As noted, the common way of trying to measure program "quality" in these studies is by the quantity of various program types broadcast. News and public affairs programming, particularly that which is locally produced, are the two common types analyzed.[5] While the quantities broadcasted of these program types is certainly one component of quality, an improvement on this measure can be made. In this study, the amount of money spent on local news programming will be used as a measure of the quality of that programming.

In a paper submitted to the FCC, Bruce Owen, a Stanford University economist, proposed that expenditures on local programming be used as a measure of the quality of that programming:

> It is a defensible maintained hypothesis that expenditures on local (non-network) programming is indicative of the quality of that programming. We define quality not by any abstract standard but by the popularity of the material and the competence of the employees who select and present the material, as reflected by their respective market prices....Given this fact, a licensee who wishes to increase the quality of his programming will necessarily spend more on programming.[6]

Rolla Edward Park, another economist, also believes that program expenditures

can be used as a measure of quality. Specifically, he suggests the use of:

> ...expenditures per hour of local programming...[as] a rough measure of quality. It is certainly not a perfect measure. It uses costs of inputs as an index of output, and there is room for many a slip between the two, but surely there is a strong general tendency for higher cost local programming to be better local programming.[7]

Finally, a study which summarized the media ownership and performance literature concluded that:

> the use of programming expenditure data as proxies for program quality would represent a significant additional measure of station performance.[8]

There are many advantages to using expenditures as a measure of the quality of local news programming. This figure is an objective one not affected by the subjective judgments of the researcher or some other group of people as to what constitutes quality. An objective measure is a far more consistent and reliable standard than a subjective one. Expenditures on local news is a quantifiable measure, and thus, it is amenable to statistical analysis. A measure of quality must be quantifiable if it is to be systematically studied at all for public policy matters such as the ownership and cable issues dealt with herein.

Besides the attributes of objectivity, consistency, and quantifiability, the expenditure figure makes a good deal of sense. Television stations that spend more on their local news programming than other stations are likely to be spending more of this difference on such things as a larger or more experienced staff, more and better news gathering equipment, or a greater amount of time devoted to broadcasting news. All of these factors certainly contribute to a better news product.

Of course, there will be some exceptions to this rule. A news

department at one station may be mismanaged leading to higher expenditures due to this inefficiency. At another station, expenditures may be higher because of a high salary for an anchorperson which has nothing to do with the anchor's ability to present a better news product. These complaints can be dismissed with the statement that while they might be reasons for the higher expenditures at some stations, they are certainly not the primary causes for higher expenditures at most stations. If a particular class of stations--such as crossowned ones--have higher expenditures, most of the higher expenditures will be because of larger or more experienced staffs, more or better equipment, or more time devoted to local news during the day.

As was noted earlier, the literature on media ownership generally concludes that multiple ownership and crossownership has no measurable ill effects on ad prices and program quantities. The author has carried out a study on the relationship between cable use and television broadcasting submitted to the FCC as part of its cable inquiry.[9] The study shows that cable use does not significantly affect station revenues, profits, or various types of local news programming quantities. This study will expand the existing body of research on media ownership and cable use into a new area of performance--the quality of local television news programming.

Hypotheses

This paper analyzes the relationship between multiple ownership, newspaper crossownership, and cable television use on the expenditures--and thus the quality--of local television news programming. In each case the important matter is whether the ownership type or increased cable use

adversely affects quality. If they do, then this result might serve as a justification for government restrictions on ownership type or the cable industry (e.g., limitations on the number of distant signals that can be imported into a market). This follows from the FCC's responsibility to regulate the television industry "in the public interest." Local news program quality is one aspect of the overall public interest performance of a station. This fact is especially true given the FCC's emphasis on local service in its regulatory scheme. However, if the two ownership types or the level of cable use in a television market do not appear to adversely affect the quality of local news programming, then this result would serve to indicate that the present restrictions on station ownership and the cable industry must be justified on other public interest grounds--or be made less restrictive.

With this in mind, the hypotheses for this study are stated negatively--that the characteristics harm the public interest by causing lower quality news. This isn't necessarily the opinion of the author, but it serves the purpose of stating the issues in such a way that failure to find evidence to support them suggests that the present FCC restrictions may not be justified--at least not with respect to the issue of local television news quality. There are three hypotheses, one for each of the elements being studied:

> As the number of television stations owned by a group increases, the quality of local news programming on those stations declines.
>
> Television stations co-owned with daily newspapers in the same market provide lower quality television news programming than television stations not so owned.

The quality of local television news programming declines as cable television use in the market increases.

Present FCC rules allow up to seven television stations to be owned by the same individual or corporation. Thus, for this study a multiple ownership variable was created to equal an integer from one to seven representing the number of television stations owned by the owners of each station in question. Crossownership is expressed as a dummy variable equalling one for television stations co-owned with a daily newspaper in the same market (as defined by the FCC), or zero otherwise. Cable penetration is the percent of homes in a television stations's area of dominant influence (ADI) that subscribe to a cable television service.

Methodology

In order to obtain data on local television news expenditures, a one page mail questionnaire was sent out to all commercial non-satellite television stations affiliated with a national network in the continental U.S. ADI's. The questionnaire was addressed to the stations' news directors. The questionnaire and first wave cover letter can be found in Appendix A. A first wave in January 1977 was followed by a second follow-up in February.

Most of the items in the questionnaire were diversionary in nature. Only one question is used in the analysis found in this paper. This was the question asking for a news expenditures figure: "What were your total news expenditures--including sports and weather but not public affairs programming--for calendar year 1976?" Out of the possible 512 stations asked, 249 (49%) answered this question. In Appendix B, secondary analysis is carried out using information on total news staff size obtained from the question: "What is the size of your news staff in full-time equivalents?"

Of the possible 512 stations, 395 (77%) answered this item.

Multiple regression analysis is used to address the three hypotheses. This technique allows the researcher to measure the effect of the two ownership types and cable use on news quality after the effects of some other important station and market characteristics have been taken into account. The final expenditure equation used here was chosen by residual analysis.[10]

Television station ownership data was obtained from Television Factbook.[11] Cable penetration figures were found in "Arbitron Television Census, Fall 1976." Four "control" independent variables are used in the regression model. The number of television homes within each station's viewing area was obtained from Television Factbook, along with whether the station is VHF or UHF. Spot Television Rates and Data[12] was used to find out the average consumer spendable income per household in a station's ADI plus the number of commercial television stations that compete with a particular station in its ADI.

In order to answer the three hypotheses posed in this paper, statistical tests (t-tests) are performed on the regression coefficients of the two ownership types and the cable use variable. Statistically significant negative coefficients would support the hypotheses while non-significant or positive coefficients would be evidence against them. The multiple regression technique used here also allows us to estimate the actual magnitude of change in expenditures resulting from different ownership types or a change in cable penetration.

Results

The results of the multiple regression analysis are found in Table 1. The numbers with three decimal places are the regression coefficients, while the corresponding numbers below them in parentheses are t-values. T-values greater than ± 1.96 suggest a statistically significant coefficient at the .05 level, while t-values greater than ± 2.58 are significant at the .01 level.

Thus, it can be seen that there is no support for the hypotheses that either multiple or cross ownership leads to lower quality news since this would require negative t-values greater than -1.96. In fact, both the regression coefficients are positive suggesting that, if anything, both the ownership types seem to garner higher expenditures.

Cable penetration does appear to have a negative effect on news expenditures, and thus an adverse effect on the quality of news. The t-value for the cable variable just barely makes the coefficient significant at the .05 level. The actual magnitude of cable's effect on news expenditures--and quality--can be obtained from the value of its regression coefficient.

While the t-values found in Table 1 have answered the hypotheses posed in this paper, the coefficients themselves can give us an estimate of the actual impact ownership type and cable use have on news quality and expenditures. The expenditures variable has been expressed in natural logarithm form in order to make its relationship with the independent variables linear--a necessity for linear regression analysis.[13] This transformation of the dependent variable allows for a straightforward interpretation of the regression coefficients. The coefficient represents the percent increase or decrease in expenditures for a one unit increase in the corresponding independent variable.[14]

Table 1

Expenditures for Local Television News: Station and Market Determinants

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	Multiple Ownership	Cross Ownership	UHF VHF	Competition	Natural log of Market Size	Income per Household (000)	Cable Penetration	R^2
Natural log of Expenditures N=249	.005 (0.22)	.165 (1.27)	.475 (4.49)	.109 (2.10)	.710 (10.33)	.062 (2.33)	-.007 (-1.99)	.597

T-values greater than ±1.96 signify significance at the .05 level, ±2.58 at the .01 level.

Multiple ownership is an integer from one to seven representing the number of stations owned by the owners of the observed station. Unit is one station added to a group's holdings.

Cross ownership equals one for crossowned stations, zero otherwise. Unit increase indicates the percent increase in expenditures by crossowned stations over non-cross stations.

UHF-VHF equals one for VHF stations and zero for UHF stations. Unit increase indicates the percent increase in expenditures by V's compared to U's.

Competition is an integer from one to eleven indicating the number of other commercial stations in the observed station's ADI. Unit increase represents the addition of one station in an ADI.

Natural log of market size is the natural logarithm of the number of TV homes in a station's viewing area. Unit in this case is not meaningful--very high t-value indicates this variable has a great impact.

Income per household is the average consumer spendable income per household in a station's ADI in thousands. Unit is a thousand dollars increase in income per household.

Cable penetration is the percent of homes in a station's ADI that subscribe to a cable TV service. Unit is a one percentage point increase in the number of homes (e.g., an increase from 26% to 27%).

Therefore, by looking at Table 1 we can arrive at approximate estimates for an increase or decrease in expenditures for a one unit increase in any of the independent variables. Variable definitions and units are found in Table 1. So, for example, television stations in a five station group in the sample studied spent about ½% more on their news (other things being equal) than the stations in a four station group. Cross-owned stations spent about 16⅔% more than non-cross-owned stations in the sample. V's spent about 47⅓% more than U's in the sample. Competing against one extra station is associated with about a 11% increase in expenditures. The market size term is hard to interpret because it is in log form but its very large t-value suggests that the size of the broadcast market is the biggest factor in determining the amount of money a station will spend on its news programming. Naturally, it costs a lot more to cover New York than Minot, North Dakota. An increase of $1000 in household income increases expenditures about 6%--this seems to be the effect of the differing costs of living that exist throughout the nation. A ten point increase in cable penetration in a market (say from 17% homes with cable to 27%) is associated with a 7% decline in news expenditures.

The percentages given above should be viewed only as rough estimates and are applicable only to those stations in the sample. However, the results are clear as far as the hypotheses go. There is no evidence found here that either multiple ownership or cross ownership of television stations leads to a poorer quality news product. Cable use does have a negative effect on news expenditures, and thus, news quality.

Discussion

While the results of this study are clear, what impact these findings should have on public policy is somewhat less clear. As with most other studies that have analyzed the relationship between multiple ownership, newspaper crossownership, and various public interest standards, there appears to be no evidence that the ownership types lead to declines in the public interest performance of television stations. Does this mean, therefore, that the Court of Appeals was off base declaring that all existing crossownerships must be abolished? Does it mean that the Supreme Court should reverse this decision?

At first glance, it does appear that the answer to these two questions is yes. After all, if specific public interest harms can't be identified with these ownership types, why should the involved parties have to suffer the financial losses brought on by divestiture? Furthermore, as with many other studies, this study found that cross-owned stations may actually have a higher standard of public interest programming. A decision to abolish crossownership may not only unnecessarily harm the media property involved, but also harm the public interest--which is contrary to the purpose of government regulation of the media. If this study, and those studies cited herein, were the final word on this matter, then the presently allowed multiple ownership quotas should not be tightened and crossownerships should be allowed to continue to exist.

While this and other studies have presented a preponderance of evidence on economic and programming grounds, there are still no studies which analyze the relationship between ownership type and "diversity in the marketplace of ideas." The Court of Appeals decision ignored all the evidence concerned

with economic and programming performance and based their decision solely on the guess that crossownerships stifle diversity of opinions. Perhaps if the evidence found in this study had been known at that time, the Court of Appeals may have decided differently--but that is highly unlikely. A study must be made using the diversity variable. The author is presently undertaking such a task and results will be forthcoming. If ownership type should still be shown to cause no apparent harm, then there will be no remaining straws for divestiture proponents to grasp at.

The result for cable television use presents a different set of policy ramifications. Since cable use is shown to have a negative relationship with the quality of local television news, we first need to ask why this seems to be the case. Then an assessment must be made concerning whether the magnitude of the negative effect is sufficient to justify FCC restrictions on the cable industry.

The FCC intrinsically believes that cable use does impare the quality of over-the-air programming. Their argument runs like this:

(a) the increase in viewing options available from cable television services will diffuse rather than expand the audience and reduce the average audience for local stations;
(b) a reduction in average audience translates into reduced revenues;
(c) reduced revenues will, without coincident reduction in costs, reduce profits;
(d) station licensees will cut costs instead of accepting reduced profits;
(e) the reduction in costs would translate into a reduction in service to the public.[15]

The model appears to be logical. An example of the reduction in service to the public may be the decreased local news programming expenditures (quality) found in this study.

However, does the reduced quality of service identified in this study justify current FCC restrictions on cable, such as the restrictions on the

number of distant signals that a cable system may carry? To answer this question fairly we need to know what corresponding benefits to the public interest can be provided uniquely by cable. This would allow us to make an overall assessment of the net benefit--or cost--of increased and unrestricted cable growth.

Unfortunately, this is a terrible burden to place on the cable industry and the research community. It is difficult--if not impossible--to measure the utility of over-the-air television compared to an unrestricted cable system that does not exist given the present FCC cable policy. If the fledgling television industry of the 40's had this same burden of proving that it would provide a net benefit to the public interest even though it might harm radio, we'd probably still gather around our "wireless" each night to get our entertainment from "Amos 'n' Andy" and "Stella Dallas."

The possible harm that cable may bear on local television station news programming may well be more than offset by the special news, sports, and weather channels found in most cable systems, along with special channels for local government activities and access forums for citizens. Furthermore, local governments can place requirements on news facilities and programs in addition to these more common services. Cable television could become the forum for local news and public affairs that the FCC tried, but failed, to make of over-the-air television.

Conclusions

This study posed three research questions of timely concern to media policymakers. Does the multiple ownership of television stations harm the public interest by lowering the quality of local news programming? Does

the crossownership of daily newspapers and television stations in the same market have this same effect? Does an increase in the number of homes subscribing to a cable television service lower the quality of news programming and thus harm the public interest performance of television stations?

The results of the multiple regression analysis clearly indicate that neither ownership type has an adverse effect on the quality of local television news. Increased cable use was associated with a slight decline in news quality. News quality is defined in this study as the level of expenditures for local news programming.

FOOTNOTES

[1]"FCC Wants to Put Some Teeth in Its Top-50 Policy or Yank Them All Out," Broadcasting, March 20, 1978, p. 30.

[2]FCC v. National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, et al., __ US __.

[3]"In the Matter of Inquiry Into the Economic Relationship Between Television Broadcasting and Cable Television," Docket No. 21284, FCC 77-407 70343, June 23, 1977.

[4]For a summary of these studies see Walter S. Baer, et al., Concentration of Mass Media Ownership: Assessing the State of Current Knowledge, (Santa Monica, Ca.: The Rand Corporation, 1974). See also three studies done after this. Michael O. Wirth and James Wellert, "Public Interest Program Performance of Multimedia-Owned TV Stations," Journalism Quarterly 53 (Summer 1976):223-230. William T. Gormley, Jr., "The Effects of Newspaper-Television Cross-Ownership on News Homogeneity," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1976). John C. Busterna, "The Effect of Multiple Ownership and Newspaper Ownership of Television Stations on Economic and Programming Performance," (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1976).

[5]Ibid.

[6]James N. Rosse, Bruce M. Owen, and David L. Grey, "Economic Issues in the Joint Ownership of Newspaper and Television Media," Research Memorandum No. 97 (Stanford, Research Center in Economic Growth, May 1970), Appendix B.

[7]Rolla Edward Park, Television Station Performance and Revenues, The Rand Corporation, P-4577, February 1971, p.8.

[8]Walter S. Baer, et al., Concentration of Mass Media Ownership, The Rand Corporation, 1974, p. 156.

[9]John C. Busterna, "Impact of Cable Television on Television Broadcasting Revenues, Profits, and Public Service Programming," Submitted Nov. 28, 1977 to the FCC in response to the Commission's "Inquiry into the Economic Relationship between Television Broadcasting and Cable Television," Docket 21284.

[10]Norman Draper and Harry Smith, Applied Regression Analysis (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), chapter three.

[11]Television Factbook, stations volume, (Washington, D.C.: Television Digest, Inc., 1976)

[12]Standard Rate and Data Service, Spot Television Rates and Data 58 (October 15, 1975).

[13] Draper, op cit.

[14] Samuel M. Selby, ed., CRC Standard Mathematical Tables, 15th ed. (Cleveland: The Chemical Rubber Co., 1967), p. 403.

[15] FCC Docket 21284, op cit., p. 1.

APPENDIX A

First Wave Cover Letter and Questionnaire

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MADISON, WISCONSIN 53706

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION
5115 VILAS COMMUNICATION HALL

AC 608-262-3691

January, 1977

Dear News Director:

We'd like your help in a study of current television news practices and operations. If you would please take a minute (and it may not take more than 60 seconds) to complete and return the enclosed form, we'd be glad to share our findings and report with you when it is completed.

We feel the many recent changes in the industry have not yet been reflected in the usual directories, etc. so we're turning to you for assistance. The data, of course, will be kept strictly confidential, with only summary data included in a scholarly report.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

James Hoyt

James L. Hoyt
Associate Professor
Head, Broadcast News Sequence

JLH:go

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
MADISON, WISCONSIN 53706

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION
5118 VILAS COMMUNICATION HALL

AREA CODE 608
262-3691

January, 1977

NATIONAL TELEVISION NEWS DIRECTORS SURVEY

1. What is the total length of your early evening local news block(s)? _____

2. What is the size of your news staff in full-time equivalents? _____

   Of these, how many are primarily reporters: _____

   Of these, how many are primarily photographers: _____

   Of these, how many are primarily editors: _____

   Of these, how many are primarily producers: _____

3. Equipment used regularly by your news department:

   Number of sound film cameras: _____

   Number of ENG units: _____

   Number of silent cameras: _____

4. Total number of wire service functions: _____
   (Include Total of "A" wires, broadcast lines, sports wires, etc.)

5. What were your total news expenditures--including sports and weather but not public affairs programming--for calendar year 1976?

   _____

Your Name _____ Title _____

Station Call Letters _____ City _____

Check here if you want tabulated results of this national survey: ☐

THANK YOU! Please return this questionnaire in the enclosed stamped envelope.

APPENDIX B

Secondary Analyses

This appendix looks at three other dependent variables that are components of the total expenditures figure used in the body of this paper: expenditures per hour of news programming, total news staff size, and time devoted to local news programming. Information on staff size was obtained from question number two on the mail questionnaire: "What is the size of your news staff in full-time equivalents?" 395 stations out of a possible 512 answered this question, a response rate of 77 percent. The amount of time devoted to local news programming was obtained from "Television Broadcast Programming Data, 1976" issued by the FCC. The proportion of broadcast time devoted to local news programming between 6a.m. and midnight was multiplied by the total amount of minutes broadcast between those hours during a composite week in 1976 to obtain the figure used here. This number was also used to obtain the expenditures per hour figure.

The results of these regression analyses are found in Table 2. The dependent variables are in natural logarithm form, so the same interpretation can be made on the regression coefficients as was made in Table 1. Again, it is found that the two ownership variables do not adversely affect these news quality components. Only the multiple ownership coefficient in the staff size equation is negative but it is far from being significant. Cable use still has about the same magnitude of ill effect on news quality in the expenditures per hour and staff size models, but has virtually no effect on news broadcast time.

The analysis of these three components of news quality, subdivisions of the total expenditures figure in the main section of this paper, only serves to reinforce the verdicts on the three hypotheses. No evidence is

presented that either multiple ownership or cross ownership adversely affects the quality of local television news programming. Further evidence is presented that increased cable use in a market leads to poorer local news programming.

Table 2

Components of Expenditures for Local Television News:
Station and Market Determinants

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	Multiple Ownership	Cross Ownership	UHF VHF	Competition	Natural log of Market Size	Income per Household (000)	Cable Penetration	R^2
Natural log of expend. per hour N=249	.005 (0.23)	.164 (1.27)	.458 (4.36)	.107 (2.08)	.700 (10.28)	.062 (2.36)	-.007 (-2.01)	.595
Natural log of news staff size N=395	-.009 (-0.61)	.029 (0.40)	.442 (6.78)	.111 (4.26)	.454 (11.56)	.050 (3.17)	-.006 (-3.18)	.654
Natural log of news time N=512	.014 (1.54)	.108 (2.37)	.374 (9.56)	.012 (0.80)	.157 (6.71)	.003 (0.28)	.001 (0.86)	.364

T-values greater then ± 1.96 signify significance at the .05 level, ± 2.58 at the .01 level.